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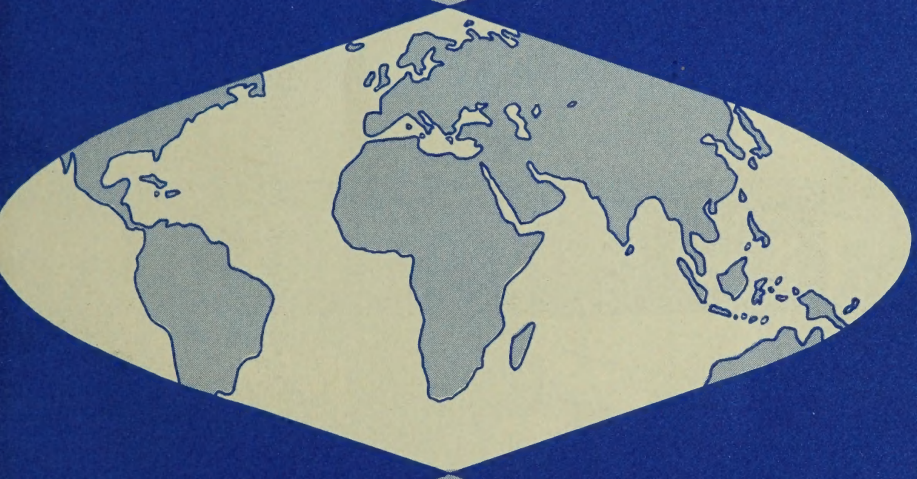
WHEN AMERICANS LIVE ABROAD



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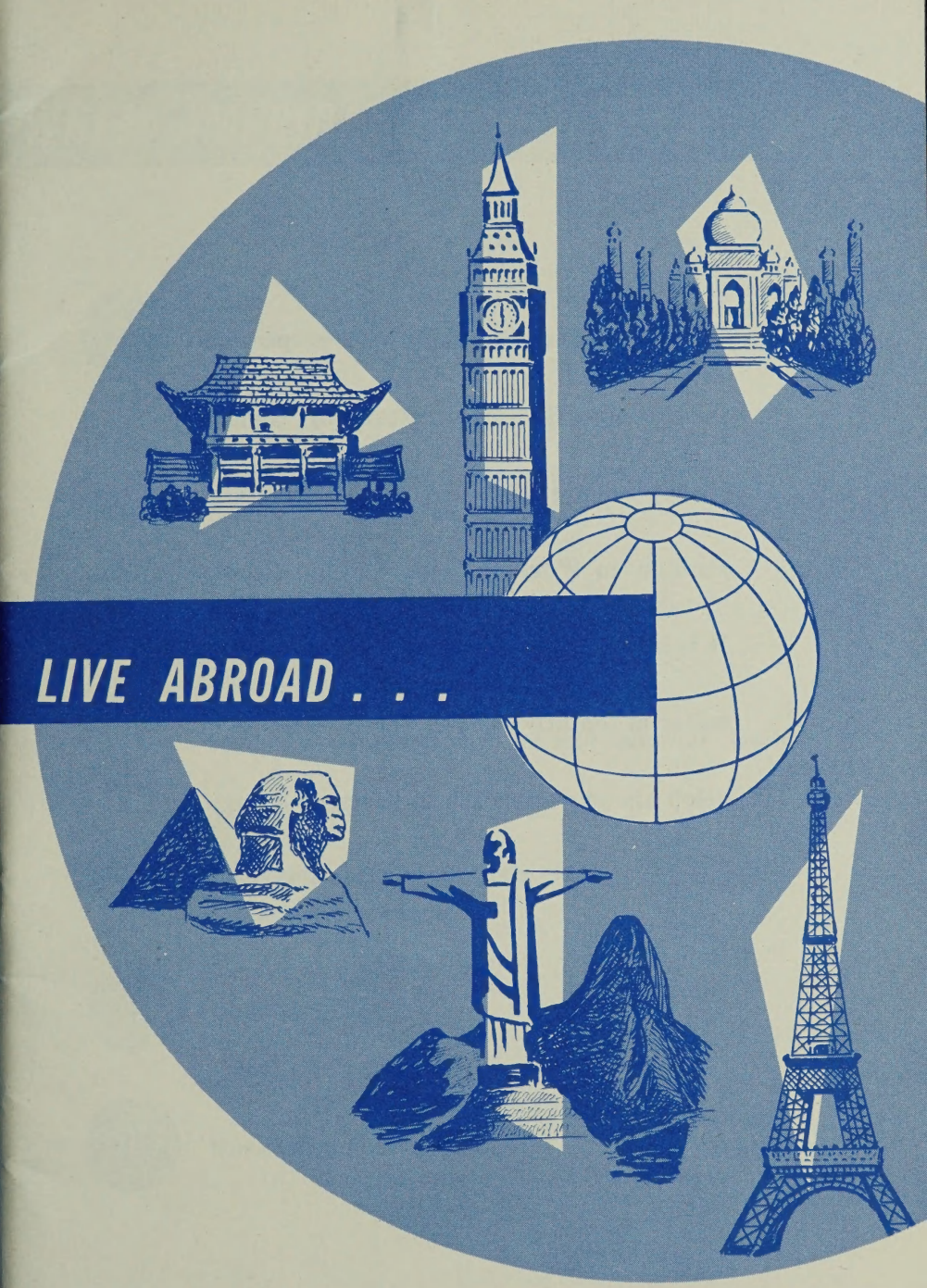
LIVE ABROAD . . .

This pamphlet was prepared at the Foreign Service Institute by Glen H. Fisher as a supplement to an orientation seminar in Working With Foreign Peoples. It is hoped that the reader will consider this material tentative and will go further to develop his own approach to overseas living.

WHEN AMERICANS LIVE ABROAD

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I

Introduction to foreign assignments

Anyone who has worked abroad or traveled extensively finds great pleasure in recalling the humorous and often embarrassing experiences he has had in an encounter with the customs of some country he has visited. In fact, it is the fascination of strange ways in foreign countries that calls the tourist to travel—the more exotic, the greater the lure.

However, the person living abroad has a much more profound problem before him than the delights of new foods and charming folkways, proper though an active interest in these may be. His effectiveness depends on an ability to make a clear and accurate interpretation of the behavior of the people that make up a "foreign" society, whether to conduct official business or to adjust to the physical and social conditions of life around him. He also needs an insight into what happens when human interaction is complicated by cultural differences. Among the thousands of Americans working abroad, many have developed this very specialized skill through long experience and successful mastery of foreign languages. There are also Americans who have not been able to understand the reasons for the differences they find and have tried to continue working with the same assumptions and approaches

they would use in the United States, often decreasing their achievement and their personal satisfaction with their assignment.

But this pamphlet is written for the person going overseas for the first time who is looking for a way to gain quickly this skill that is the hallmark of the experienced United States Government servant abroad. While this is never finally gained without actual experience, suggestions can be made which should facilitate living in a foreign society. Some of these are merely commonsense; others come from the accomplishments of experts in the behavioral sciences. In the latter case, any new concepts will be kept to a minimum as it is intended that this pamphlet stay within the bounds of "advice" and not wander into excessive abstractions.

To begin with, this business of living and working with people abroad, technically a situation of culture contact, is a two-way street; one cannot use American culture as a single standard toward which one-way comparisons are made. In other words, the American way of life, like the particular foreign way observed, must be thought of as but one of the several hundred cultures cataloged around the world which human beings have developed to solve the problems which face them in existing on this planet.

When the American goes abroad, he carries a stock of "cultural baggage" with him: those typically American traits which are so natural to him that he tends not even to be conscious of them, but which nevertheless make him unique and recognizable around the world. True, this seems obvious; yet it is of crucial

importance in understanding what goes on when American meets German, Egyptian, or Japanese. For the American is ethnocentric; he feels that his ways are the basically natural and human ways of living, working, thinking, getting along with people, governing his country, and all the rest. This is a useful delusion, for the feeling that the earth revolves around one's own way of life is fundamental to cooperation between people within a given society. And of course this is not exclusively an American characteristic.

So our ethnocentricism is natural, but certainly much of what *we take for granted* cannot be so taken in a situation where we work with *people who are ethnocentric to another pattern of behavior.* Although we think our way the best, it is not so regarded universally; to people on the outside, our behavior may be as strange and hard to understand as theirs is to us. There is good reason for beginning an understanding of working with people overseas by looking first for the qualities of normal American behavior that may be in contrast to local practices abroad—qualities which will provide the basis for the American's judgment on that which he finds in a host country.

II

What the American takes with him

The world's peoples present many striking cultural contrasts: Monte Carlo aristocrat – Hindu ascetic; London merchant – Chinese peasant. In such perspective, what kind of people are we Americans? What is the combination of traits which is our trademark in the market place of the world's cultures?

Only a few fundamentals can be listed here with the hope that this will stimulate the reader to develop a habit of trying to understand his own behavior when overseas, as well as that which is foreign to him. To describe specific traits would be endless. We would go through the styles of clothing we wear, the foods we eat, the pastimes we seek, the business methods we use, and our technological skills. We would not pass over the independence we grant American women or the privileges granted to adolescents. But instead of listing details, let us discuss a few major value systems we hold, and some implications of them.

We can properly start with our value on *freedom,* not necessarily as a patriotic gesture, but because this is usually among first-mentioned items and indeed does lead to some important points regarding American culture and an American's outlook on life.

Love of freedom does not distinguish us from other peoples, but the uniqueness comes from the

answer to the question, freedom from what? The Hindu ascetic mentioned above is "free" when he has escaped subservience to certain physical drives as hunger and sensual pleasure and can thus spend time in worship and contemplation. We choose only certain aspects of freedom; we obviously are not completely free to do as we please. We would have no cohesive society at all if this were the case. We are slaves to new clothing styles; we are pushed around by the caprices of business conditions or are restricted by the censure of the neighbors on the street. What we do value is freedom from a rigid social structure or from all-pervading control by a dictating super organization as government, either secular or clerical. We want freedom for the individual to choose his own course in competition with his fellows according to the rules of American culture, rather than be asked to accept the dictates of self-made authorities.

As a result, it is difficult for us to understand the contentment of the peasant in a rigid society as in southern Italy who is not equally free to rise on the social ladder. Or we are unable to see how people could be satisfied with a system which guarantees freedom from want or unemployment to the loss of freedom from a dictatorial regime. Freedom is relative to the definition of the group.

In part, our idea of freedom can be explained by historical processes, for its roots go back to Western Europe from which we have derived much of the content of American culture and to the events which led our early settlers to abandon Europe and seek a new

society where many of our present-day concepts of freedom could first be established in practice and to our experience with an ever-present frontier.

Our idea of freedom is also explained by its fundamental relation to a second major value we might list, that of *individualism* and *individual human life and personality*. We cannot separate the idea of freedom from our idea of the individual. We respect individual achievement, individual integrity, and individual choice. Rugged individualism, while changing in intensity, especially since the depression of the 1930's and the Second World War, is still a motif on the American scene. The importance of the individual is a central theme of most of our varied American religions, a great contrast to certain Eastern religions as Hinduism or Buddhism wherein the person considers individualism but an illusion in his mystical attempt to become part of a timeless and spaceless reality; or Shintoism (Japan), where high value is placed on the state and the race.

This sense of freedom and self-reliant individualism is closely related to the way in which most Americans interpret the world around them. Quite the opposite from the adjustment to the will of Allah that is so important to the Middle East citizen, the American conceives of the world as something which can be molded to his use; he feels himself a potential master of his environment. (The clouds are miserly with their rain; the American flies up to them, to tinker with them until they produce to satisfaction!)

Americans tend not to contemplate unnecessarily; they manipulate. They think in terms of cause

and effect, easily believe in science. Knowledge has purpose only when it can be put to use, and Americans probably stand first among the world's peoples in the art of applied knowledge. For example, even though it was an Austrian monk who discovered the Mendelian laws of heredity, it was Americans for the most part who refined them so they could be put to work to develop hybrids in agriculture. It is this capacity for imagination in the application of knowledge that makes our technical assistance program so strategic.

It is no accident that we have come to place considerable value on *efficiency, practicality, progress,* and *time.* Indeed, these "virtues" are so basic to our technologically oriented life that they are emotionally charged. Accomplishment in mastery over our environment is so pleasing to us that we tend to worship bigness, power, speed, and novelty. When an American so endowed clashes with a person who lives in tradition, who dislikes change, and overlooks technological potentials, the results are not harmonious. ("These poor Arabs haven't come into the 20th century yet!"—"Ah these Americans, they have no souls!")

Americans value *democracy* and feel this to be of great importance, both as a personal possession and as an export item. The urgency of interpreting democracy overseas is of common concern, yet the implementation of this poses a number of difficulties. Not the least is the American's trouble in putting his idea of democracy into words or of accurately defining it so that it makes sense to non-American ears. We are aware that democracy implies a form of group decision and government which specifies majority rule tem-

pered by protection of individual and minority rights; it refers to constitutional processes to the negation of personal or arbitrary rule. But the democracy that we value in the United States is more than this, and it is the expression of the remaining "something" that troubles us.

For one thing, democracy means somewhat different things to different people in our heterogeneous United States. It is not quite the same to a business executive as to a labor union leader, or a member of a minority group, or a Maine farmer. Each sees democracy in light of his individual circumstance, so that, although many basic components of their conceptions overlap, a complete unanimity is unlikely.

Secondly, American democracy can be comprehended only in light of the full scope of American tradition and culture and in the historical processes from which it has emerged. It is dependent upon our form of individualism and concepts of freedom mentioned above, upon our middle class society, our mass education, particular ideas of equality, etc.—many items which are so natural and so taken for granted in the United States that, when asked to verbalize a definition of democracy, the American finds he has no practice in explaining these extra facets of the concept which finally define the function of American democracy. And without all these aspects of democracy under conscious consideration, it becomes unlikely that the person in another culture will get a picture of American democracy in all its dimensions.

Notice how this confusion was borne out when an admiration of American democracy led a number of Latin American countries to adopt the *form* of our

Constitution. The results have not been the same; the cultural contexts are different. The form of our Constitution is no more an embodiment of American democracy than are marriage laws the keystone of American family life. Democracy as we experience it is not simply a form of social structure, a set of ground rules for group action, nor a specific philosophy or doctrine. It is a cultural complex of interlocking values and implementing customs that are peculiar in their combination to the United States. This is why democracy is so difficult to export, or even completely to interpret overseas. It is also the reason why democracy cannot be quickly replaced in the United States by new ideologies—its roots are too numerous and too strongly entwined into the total fabric of a way of life.

Above we have mentioned *equality* as a core concept of American democracy. Certainly equality *per se* is one of the themes of American value systems or, more accurately, *equality of opportunity*. With few exceptions, this has been a guiding premise from the arrival of the first settlers to the present time. Whether or not reality is completely in accord with this American dream need not be considered to support the fact that the belief stands out as prominent in American thinking and as important in characterizing the American's approach to life and human relationships. Like the development of freedom and individual personality as core values, historical processes have given the concept of equality a distinctive flavor in the United States, and like the above items, its connotation differs with varying groups within our boundaries. For our purposes a few implications should be mentioned.

One is the way that equality is reflected in interpersonal relations. We tend to gravitate toward an assumption of equal status, if possible, rather than determine our proper relationships with each other by a set of hierarchical positions. To illustrate, compare the student-teacher relationship in the United States to that of Europe, Germany perhaps more specifically. There the master and authority role of teacher is emphasized and the subordinate apprentice role of the student. In the United States this is minimized as self-expression and creativity of the student is encouraged, and the teacher becomes friend and leader. More than one European student in the United States has remarked on the surprising freedom found here of the student with the teacher, and the Japanese have been fairly shocked at the apparent lack of dignity of American professors sent to that country to assist in university affairs after the war. Even in the American military where lines of authority are of supreme importance, the idea of teamwork is nevertheless regarded as important to morale.

This predisposition to regard one's fellow man by informal horizontal differentiations rather than by the dictates of a more rigid, vertically differentiated, social structure causes the American some difficulty when he is in areas that emphasize the latter idea. Servants in his overseas home may occasion the first confusion. A stateside concept of labor relations does not seem to impress the servant, and the middle-class American's attempt to be household master and gentleman may be too feeble to impress him either. "Problems with the servants" dominates many an overseas conversa-

tion, and the advice one can receive from fellow Americans is as varied as the methods that have been employed to cope with the matter—the American has little experience with the subtleties of human relations in a system of social classes.

Also it is difficult for many people in other countries to fit the American into their own class system. He may like to do his own gardening, or drive his own car and even tinker with its grimy insides. His wife is ready to undertake whatever chore is needed even though it be considered work for which menial servants hold a monopoly in that country. Yet by education, wealth, position, etc., he is apparently upper class. To add to this confusion, the American may be irritated when he sees evidence of sharp class distinction; it violates his feelings of fair play and his respect for the "common man." It is opposed to his idea that men have equal opportunity to compete for prestige positions.

Our concept of equality molds the particular kind of class system we have. We do recognize class and social prestige differences of course, but they are diffuse and flexible or, stated more technically, we have an *open* class system with a marked absence of social barriers to changing one's position on the social ladder. With an emphasis on the individual and his potentialities, we are all taught we should advance in position. Parents hope their children will exceed their own achievements; we compete in school and speculate as to which student is most likely to "succeed" in life. We are emotionally attached to the notion that "anyone can get ahead," and we accord prestige to the person

who has. Conversely anyone can lose his position, can end up on "skid row." Few Americans would admit to being anything but some degree of middle class in an open system in which they are, potentially at least, as good as or better than the next man. Thus no one is important enough to be sacred; we can laugh at anyone from the town drunk to the President.

A unique aspect of our class system is the fact that we especially relate *achievement* with esteem and prestige. Yet when achievement is recognized, it only grants respected social position, not license or privilege over other men, who in other considerations are still equals.

Perhaps enough said for our point; we are only suggestive here in the broad field of American class and economic structure. The point is that the special orientation of the American to class symbols and prerogatives is subject matter for much introspection abroad when he tries to comprehend his own reactions to patterns of class in a host country. However, one should not leave the discussion without recognizing that a general pattern of caste distinction is still real in the United States, even though it is in conflict with our formal declaration of democracy and our sense of freedom, equality, and fairness. On the part of many Americans this may carry an unconscious predisposition to judge that which is darker in skin to be lower in quality.

Without attempting to embark on a moral discussion of our current problems in coping with these inconsistencies of American life, it should be pointed out that (1) such feelings regarding minority groups

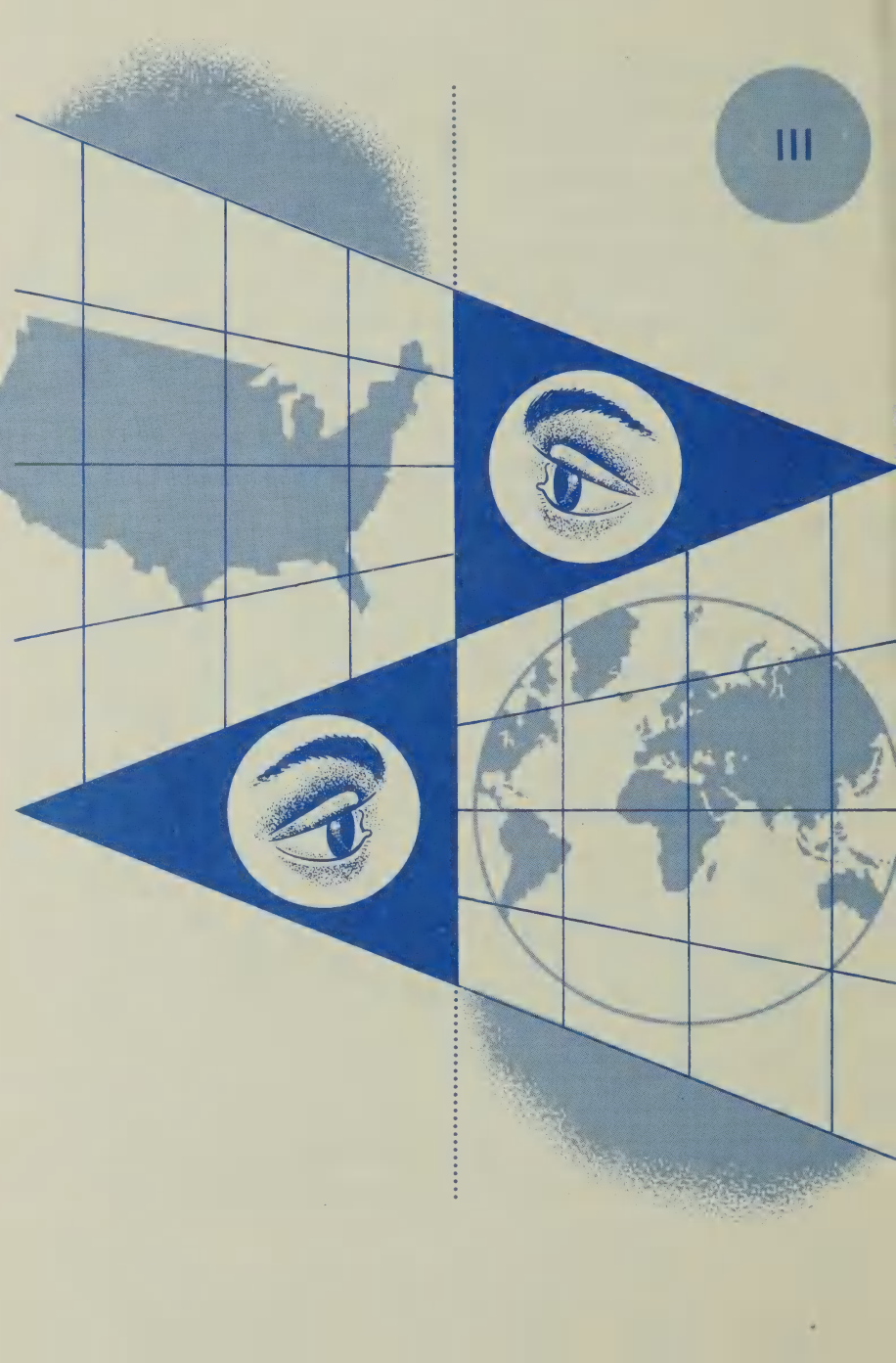
may affect an American's reactions to nationals of another country and that (2) in many parts of the world it is a much-observed and highly important issue as other peoples evaluate our democratic system and speculate on our intentions toward them as a national group (e. g., India). It should be added that the potentialities for misinformation on this matter, or of emotionally charged adverse propaganda, pose considerable danger to the effectiveness of American representation abroad.

Americans place value on *material comfort, cleanliness* (which is "next to Godliness"), *sanitation,* (an American index to degree of civilization), and *acquisition of material goods,* for which many critics charge us with being materialistic, especially after having witnessed our distress when our standards in this regard are not fulfilled in a foreign country. It is true, with American resources, technological application, and an economic system that easily permits wide distribution of goods, that Americans have come to expect many things as necessities which are still luxuries abroad. But this apparent "materialism" is not, as sometimes charged, simply a mad scramble for the dollar and acquisition of material goods to the negation of any human values. We do place much emphasis on religious affairs, on sports, and art, and a host of nonmaterialistic pursuits. As noted above, the well-being of the individual person, and the value of human life and its dignity, certainly dominate the American scene along with our flare for business and technological application. The critic should also remember that in the United States material goods are important as *symbols*

of *achievement*—one of the most highly valued objectives in American culture.

So the label "materialistic" should be tempered not only with recognition of a host of nonmaterialistic values but also with the question: Which do we value more, the tribute to accomplishment or the sensual pleasure of luxury goods and conveniences? The true answer may not be a sharp choice between the two, but a correct interpretation of the American's use of materials must go beyond the visual evidence of materials consumed to the social meaning of that consumption. Unfortunately the possession of luxuries may not have the same connotation abroad. In another social and economic system it may suggest exploitation rather than achievement.

In conclusion, we grant the superficiality of this coverage but stress the fact that the American overseas cannot adequately comprehend his relationships with host nationals until he is aware of the uniqueness of his own behavior, the same which is taken for granted at home. How unique it is depends on the cultural contrast with the country of assignment. As much of our own culture has its roots in Western Europe, the smaller contrasts would be expected there. But smaller contrasts sometimes make more difficult the task of isolating the subtle differences which can mount into powerful barriers to international communication and cooperation.


III

How the American is received abroad

It is valuable for Americans to be aware of what they are as specimens of American society. It is just as important to evaluate the host citizen's ideas as to what life is like in the United States. Not having participated, they know it only by outside observation through a limited number of "windows." Which windows they have used may explain any distortion in impression: Have they traveled in the United States, seen us in the movies, or experienced military occupation? Do they get letters from relatives in the United States, or do they depend on suggestions given either by a sensational local press or a determined hostile propaganda source? What is their history of contact with Americans working or traveling as tourists in that locality?

Not only do host nationals see their visitors in light of their own way of life but through past ideas they have picked up about Americans. The effective United States representative abroad is the one who is analytically conscious of this, both in estimating the conceptions of Americans held by host nationals and in the realization that he himself becomes one of these "windows" through which the local population derives an image of "American."

IV

Toward interpretation of foreign behavior

At first the behavior of people in your host country may appear as an assortment of strange customs, apparently without rhyme or reason, perhaps indulged in because of the qualities of "race," their ignorance, or simple perversity. In an attempt to find order and reason in a strange culture, a first step is well made to realize that basically foreign behavior is not so different from ours, as all humans are of one species and have fundamentally the same needs and potentialities and that, whatever the pattern of culture chosen to answer those needs, the variation must stay within the bounds dictated by the physical and social characteristics of human life. And of course humans are sufficiently similar that any normal person could practice any culture of the world if he had been brought up in it. Remembering that practically everything that we or the foreign person does is learned—from the language spoken to the moral codes followed—is a useful orientation. Foreign customs, then, are "socially shared habits," just as ours are.

A second grasp on foreign behavior is taken when it is recognized that foreign customs and institutions are closely interrelated, just as ours are. To

many foreign ears, the American's constant question "Is the water here safe to drink?" might seem less ridiculous to them if they were aware of the background out of which such a question arises: a society where disease prevention is highly valued, where "cleanliness is next to Godliness," and where shiny modern plumbing fixtures signify well-being. And in France the assumption that the guest will regularly have wine with his meal rather than water is less disquieting to an American traveler if he is aware of the context: an area where the art of wine production is a tradition, where good wine is a symbol of decent living by rich and poor alike, and where alcoholic consumption has not been associated with "sin" or moral weakness. In both cases a number of customs are intertwined and help explain each other.

It is hard enough to understand a foreign custom away from its context; it is impossible if the assumptions of another culture are applied to it. Note the difference: One traveler sees a "silly" surplus of cows roaming the streets of an underfed Hindu village—"Why don't they eat steak if they're hungry?" A second observer, more sophisticated in foreign ways and more cautious, sees not only the cow but also a strong net of religious and supernatural beliefs and meanings in the lower folk level of Indian society and observes that the nutrition problem is indeed complex.

The technique of looking for the context is fairly obvious in situations where cultural differences are great, but it is just as useful in places where contrasts with American life are minor. For example, when positions exist in foreign countries as business execu-

tive, schoolteacher, army colonel, or Minister of Health, positions which have a direct counterpart in American society, the American frequently assumes the incumbent will play the "standard" role for these positions. But even if the "job description" were the same, the supporting culture would not be. The way a Brazilian business executive, a German army colonel, or the British Minister of Health play their part can be understood only in light of Brazilian, German, and British patterns of professional culture. The subtle differences have frustrated the communication process for more than one American professional!

In fact, even a given material object may not be the same "thing" the world over when its use, function, and meaning are tied to varying patterns of living. Anyone who has tried to drive in Paris or Mexico City will quickly agree that somehow the automobile is not the same "thing" there as in Washington.

Thus the behavioral scientist insists that there is no such thing as a queer custom; if it is "customary," it has a rationale in that society, although the practitioner may not be able to provide a lucid analysis of his actions. The real expert on a given foreign country is not the person with a storehouse of facts about an area and its peoples but the person who knows how these facts fit together—how customs fit together into institutions and how institutions are interrelated in the total way of life.

Let us now examine another dimension of foreign (or our own) behavior. It is essential to realize that not only do people learn many of their daily habits—customs in the popular sense—from their society,

but they also acquire "mental customs"—many of their ways of thinking, their ideas, likes and dislikes. The American is not born with a desire to follow baseball; he learns it from those around him. The Japanese is not concerned about "face" at birth; this is learned. We thus arrive at the real core of interpreting foreign behavior: What determines a Korean's or a Spaniard's normal desires, goals, values, or anxieties—What motivates him? Why does he "see" different facets of a problem under consideration than those you see or observe and evaluate differently items in a newspaper or events on the street? Customs abroad that we can see with our eyes or participate in with our physical senses pose few problems. But it takes a long time to understand what is often loosely referred to as "the Latin mind" or "Chinese psychology." To the person who must accomplish work through people overseas, the importance of the question can hardly be overemphasized: *What are the reasons for cross-cultural differences in thought, motivation, and perception habits?*

Part of the answer comes in turning our attention to language, for not only is language a function of the prevailing culture (Arabic is said to have more than a thousand words referring to camels and camel equipment), but it is at the same time a mold into which the thoughts and ideas of a people must fit. Thought processes ride the rails of a definite and limited series of words and patterned word-combinations through which these symbols are built into ideas, abstractions, reasoning, etc. For our immediate purpose it is submitted that the American will never really penetrate

the thinking of people in a new country until he has first penetrated the language which carries, reflects, and molds the thoughts and ideas of that people. Certainly few would ever come to really understand us and the American way of life who were not familiar with our brand of English right down to slang and probably profanity. Excellent further discussion of this is available elsewhere. (See suggested readings on page 35.)

However, in thinking, in communicating, and in decision making, language is but the vehicle, not the passenger. An individual's behavior, whether typically British, American, or purely personal, is a manifestation of his *personality*—that organization of emotions, ideas, goals, anxieties, values, knowledge, in short that mental screen through which filter his impressions of the world about him and, outwardly, his psychic reaction to these censored impressions. While all individuals have unique personalities, the common experience of living in a single culture provides a basis for personality *similarity* in the members of a given society. You accept many of the "mental customs" of your culture as part of your own personality. It thus becomes practical to describe basic patterns of national character as a means of predicting many probable characteristics of normal individuals of the society in question. Or, let us say, we have a basis for knowing ahead of time what the thought processes, motivations, and perceptions of a foreign person are likely to be if we are familiar with the usual personality pattern for the culture which our foreign counterpart represents.

The content of our own "national character" was what we were really talking about when discuss-

ing the uniqueness of American culture. We could predict that most Americans would like bigness, aspire to get ahead, value freedom and democracy, believe in equality and, for that matter, associate picnics with hot dogs and soda fountains with drug stores, as these items seem to be standard in American national character. We are not saying that Americans are carbon copies of each other, nor are we saying that the items which we include are not possibly included in the basic personality structure of other peoples. We simply say that there seems to be a particular configuration of such mental customs for each of the various cultures and that most people practicing a certain culture will themselves have a pattern of personality that fits within the limits characteristic of the group of which the person is a member.

In Latin America we might predict that people we meet would place value on membership in a large extended family, would exhibit some degree of fatalism and mysticism and strong individualism, would emphasize humanitarian values, love of ideas, form, and ceremony. These appear to be part of a Latin American personality structure. And so we might go around the world. Unfortunately, research on this problem is in its infancy, and we cannot at this point scientifically describe the probable personality pattern for all the people you will work with. However, armed with this concept, you may know better what you are looking for in the psychology of foreign behavior.

As even the policies of large nations are ultimately the behavior of human beings—perhaps millions of them—the understanding of individual motivation in different cultural milieu is fundamental.

Most socially shared personality traits are so completely internalized that people are not even aware of them. Some are emotionally charged, as disgust for filth, particular concepts of modesty, or belief in religious creeds, in our society. On the other side of the coin, *we* would deem it peculiar that anyone would be emotionally upset by the thought of drinking milk, eating pork, or, if a woman, dressing in slacks; yet each of these are "normally disgusting" somewhere.

It is wise to remember that situations change, culture changes, and personality patterns change. In Germany, for example, where many young adults of today may have gone through the Hitler youth movement, or in areas of Europe where wartime experience of violence, home disruption, and hunger became, not individual experiences, but group experiences, one may well find the basis for new group personality patterns. Sensitivity to this may pay dividends in interpreting the behavior of people in such situations.

Perhaps the hardest of all to understand are those local people who work regularly with Americans or other "strangers." You will likely meet them first, and possibly most often. Their bicultural role as they provide services, act as interpreters, or work in our embassies or overseas business offices is inevitably associated with a uniqueness of character that can be comprehended only by consideration of the particular case. Sometimes, because they occupy a marginal position in relation to their own society, they too may have difficulty resolving the contradictions posed by two different cultures.

The problem of observation in a foreign environment

Although one has attained a promising theoretical understanding of foreign culture and peoples before arriving abroad, he may find that his talent rings a hollow note at first encounter with the varied and assorted daily events that are part of what is abstractly referred to as the "way of life" of the host country. For, unfortunately, mere physical presence does not mean that the traveler is now *observing* a foreign culture, even though he sees a host of activity around him. How does one know what he is looking for? How can one register all the tidbits of foreign behavior that come his way and have them come out as meaningful patterns as customs, institutions, or national character traits? The problem becomes one of effective observation, whether to equip oneself for official duty or to gain personal satisfaction from overseas living. Does there exist any satisfactory guide to this objective?

There is, of course, no magic key, no universal chemist's chart of social elements or set of molecular formulae capable of reducing a society's habits to a mechanical process of qualitative analysis. Important strides have been made by the scientists of culture and

society, but their accomplishments still leave much to gain in maturity in cross-cultural affairs, and, for the layman, do not easily pertain to this discussion. Even an attempt to catalog the subject matter of culture is a formidable undertaking, although this has been done and is available as the *Outline of Cultural Materials*, developed by a team of prominent anthropologists. (See the reading list on p. 35.)

One of the factors which makes the observation problem so difficult is that culture has so many different levels of reality, ranging, for example, from the significance of a simple gesture to the dynamics of a government bureaucracy or the interplay of economic forces. Hence no single guide is practical.

But any person living abroad can make his observation more useful and meaningful and at the same time make his stay abroad more interesting. The suggested technique is to organize observation around two questions: What human problems have to be solved by the people of this society? What method does the culture provide for solving them?

The pattern of life in any society has the interesting quality of continuity despite the fact that the individuals who practice it come and go. A culture is, to the newborn, a readymade and pretested set of answers for the decisions he must make as a human in his particular physical and social environment. The enriching aspect of life abroad is, then, the recognition of the great variety of solutions which humans have developed to cope with life's problems and the consequences of their choices. We may call attention to some of the more universal "problems."

Even the most casual observer is aware of the varied ways that cultures provide for sustaining the human body. Carbohydrates may come from rice and curry, or from mashed potatoes; food may be distributed in a bazaar, or a suburban supermarket; shelter is a camel-hair tent, or an English Tudor house; the lady wears a sari, housedress, or a kimono; water is consumed with tea at 4 o'clock, with Yerba Mate, or with chlorine. Whatever the precise custom, the society is still exercising its privilege to choose from many alternatives to protect and sustain the human body—a problem all cultures must answer in some way.

No group would survive at all if its way of life did not provide for some means of protecting the newborn infant until able to fend for himself, but again the variety in family composition, privileges, and responsibilities, and the means used to educate the child, is endless. The role of the woman in the foreign family is especially worthy of study by American women abroad, and a number of observers have been fascinated by trying to relate customs of child care and training to adult personality characteristics.

In a very few societies there is little social life beyond an extended family, but usually the very existence of a sizable population calls for elaborate customs regulating human cooperation and coordination of effort—at which point the observation of culture gets very complex. First, the culture must dictate what meanings go with given sounds to provide for language, and thus for communication. Leadership, class and caste distinctions, customs of crime and punishment, means of defense against other groups, the division of

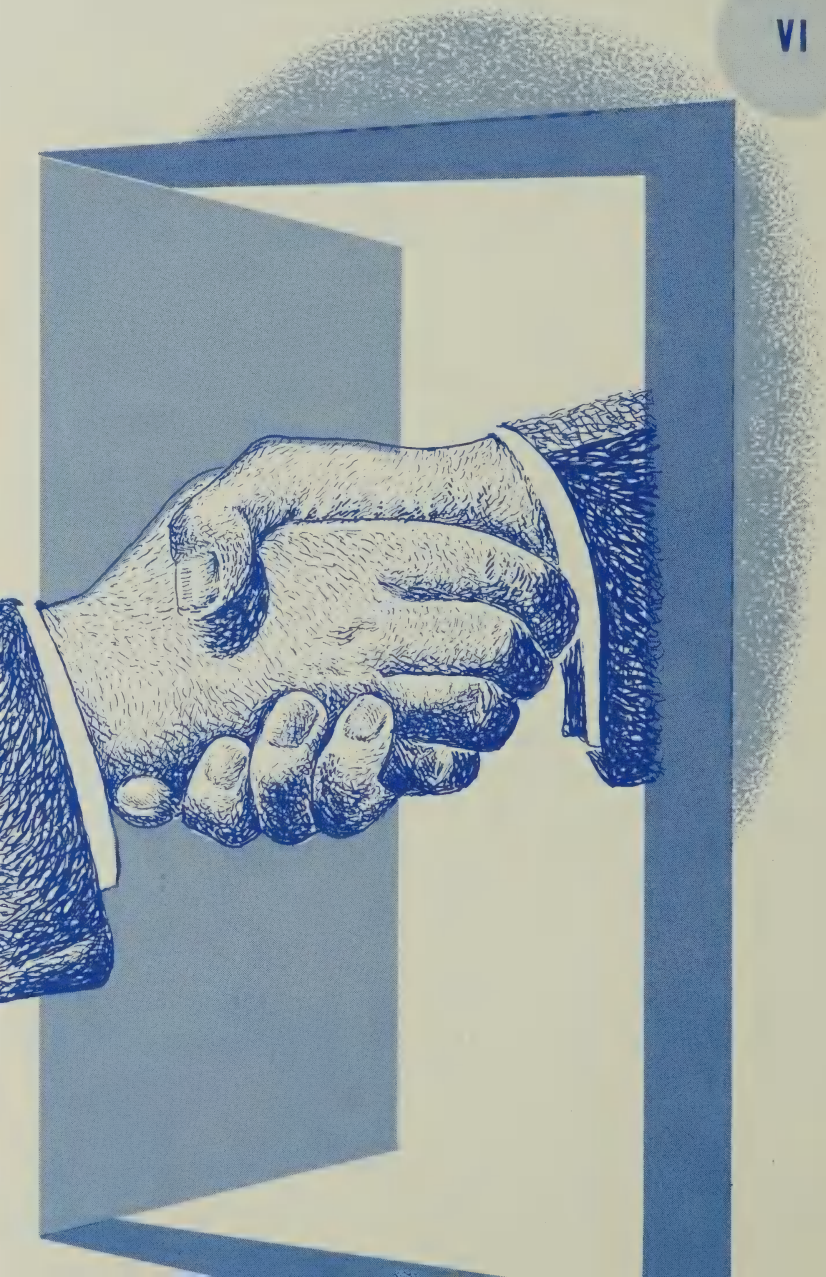
labor, etiquette and standards in interpersonal relations, and the forms of government itself are all examples of how a group's culture provides the individual with a blueprint for existence in a social environment. Handshakes, titles, police, and job descriptions are all attempts to regulate human relations in our society. This aspect of culture may prove the most difficult in observation; but, again, thinking of customs as solutions to problems is fundamental.

Somehow the culture must explain the supernatural, that part of experience not readily explained by the primary senses, as man tends to be anxious about that which is unknown. In some cases science has pushed back the boundaries of the unknown, but this in itself is culture's answer to the need; and in all situations there is something left for the systems of religion, folklore, and beliefs to define, as death and disease, the past and the future, require explanation. It may well be that to the scientifically oriented a group-held belief or superstition does not conform to reality. However, the belief may still serve its function of relieving anxiety—of providing an explanation. It is only the person who holds private delusions that is queer.

The foreign culture, as our own, provides meaning for life by designating which system of values and which goals and objectives of all those that might be held should define individual purpose and give integration to the way of life. Even concepts of beauty and esthetics are established: Whether one is pleased by music rendered from a five- or an eight-note scale is a matter to be referred to the instruction of culture.

Without a pretense at being comprehensive in this discussion, let us return to the initial question: What is the secret of meaningful observation overseas? It is, at least in part, the skill of appreciating the fact that alternative methods exist for solving human problems and that you, as an observer, are searching out the particular solutions that have become customary in your country of assignment. The American, as a product of his own culture, will still prefer his own ways, but from the perspective of contrast he will be better equipped to understand his own country.

Finally, it is suggested that an active interest in searching for the variety in human accomplishment not only brings its own satisfactions but makes the difference between the person who endures a stay abroad in boredom and self-pity and the person who finds in a foreign assignment the excitement of new experience. One of the most unnecessary tragedies seen among Americans living overseas is the opportunity lost by the individual who is so upset by the shock of being away from the secure, well-defined expectations of his own community that he is inadequate to meet the challenge to expand his own horizons and add to his experience a sampling of the wealth of another culture.



Summary

This discussion has involved many general and theoretical suggestions. It would be a happy ending—Americans like happy endings—if a set of rules could be given for living overseas. Unfortunately, even if we were competent in making them, no set could fit all areas, or variations within areas or among peoples. The following are offered as applicable in most places:

1. Know as much as you can about your area of assignment, its significant geography, history, current events and problems, economics, and relationships with other nations and areas.

2. Find out as much as you can about the way of life in the area, both the customs and institutions which can be observed and those that go on in the minds of your hosts. Be sure you understand yourself as a product of American culture when you make your study.

3. Go as far as you can in learning the language. You are not really profound in your interpretations of everyday events until you know it well.

4. Avoid quick judgments on the basis of first impressions; it is normal to be confused for a while. Also remember that you may encounter people abroad

who deviate from the standards of their society just as you find the socially irresponsible at home. Not all behavior can be explained away by cultural difference.

5. Slow down. Few peoples place as much emphasis on time as we do, and the leisure so gained is usually spent on some form of increased informal association. The tempo of life of a people is usually consistent with the rest of the culture. As the demands of your job allow it, enjoy it.

6. Try not to get lost in the cold calculation advised above. In most areas your successful personal relationships with your hosts are more dependent on your own good intention, sensitivity and respect for other people, and willingness to learn than on the precise adherence to local rules of etiquette or the most complete academic understanding of the local area and culture.

Suggested readings

The ideas which have been introduced in this pamphlet could be further pursued through a very broad field of related literature and also in formal courses offered by various educational institutions. Thus no short list of suggested readings could possibly be representative. The list below is to be considered a *sample* of the literature and in this sense may be useful as a guide to further exploration by the reader.

A. Sources on American culture as seen at home and abroad

American Academy of Political and Social Science. *The Annals,* vol. 295, "America Through Foreign Eyes." September 1954.

This is a collection of 14 articles in which the authors, reporting from research projects among several contrasting cultures, discuss the ideas that various groups of foreign people hold about America and Americans. It is excellent further reading for understanding how Americans are received abroad. It should be available in most larger libraries.

Barghoorn, Frederick C. *The Soviet Image of the United States: A Study in Distortion.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1950.

While much of this is a technical review of relationships between officials of the United States and Russia, several chapters deal with the attitudes Russian people have of the United States, the source of these ideas, and the way in which their attitudes can be distorted.

Brogan, D. W. *The American Character.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1950 (first published, 1944).

A Scotch historian writes about American institutions, not national character as implied. It is interesting to note the things about America which he thinks should be explained, and it may remind the American reader of certain important aspects of his own heritage, although he may not always agree with the writer's interpretation.

Commager, Henry Steele. (ed.) *America in Perspective.* New York: Random House, 1947.

This is a collection of writings about the United States by people of other countries. It is a valuable and interesting aid in pointing out some of the facets of American life which appear unique to other peoples. (See also Commager's *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880's.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950.) The bibliography is especially important to the person wishing to do more serious research into American life.

de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America* (2 vols.). New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1946, or New York: Vintage Books, 1954.

This classic treatise on American democracy was first published in French in 1835. Because of its penetrating insight into the philosophy and practice of American democracy at that part of our history, it is now of considerable interest as it provides perspective to the current American scene. This is for the more serious reader. Vol. I analyzes democratic forms and institutions; Vol. II discusses the influence that the democratic way had on other aspects of American life.

Mead, Margaret. *And Keep Your Powder Dry.* New York: William Morrow and Co., 1943.

An anthropologist gives her interpretation of American life and ways as a contribution to American morale and self-evaluation in World War II. Granting the complexity of American life and the pressure under which the book was compiled, her discussion is nevertheless remarkably broad and thought provoking and unique in its approach.

Perry, Ralph Barton. *Characteristically American.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1949.

A series of lectures by a Harvard philosopher on the behavior and philosophy which he regards as unique to the United States. This would be useful source reading for the person who will need to discuss American life with foreign intellectuals.

Williams, Robin. *American Society.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952.

A sociologist's analysis of American life, employing a very comprehensive review of the most dependable data on American society to arrive at his penetrating treatment. Scientific in orientation, it is perhaps heavy reading for a beginner in social analysis. Chapter 11, "Value Orientations in American Society" is especially suggested. It was a principal reference for this pamphlet.

B. Sources pertinent to understanding foreign peoples

Benedict, Ruth. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1946.

The rationale of Japanese behavior, compiled partly from secondary sources during wartime by a well-known anthropologist. It not only is pertinent to Japan but illustrates the kinds of information that are needed about a people for understanding a national character.

Coon, Carlton. *Caravan: The Story of the Middle East.* New York: Henry Holt and Co., Inc., 1951. A sample in one method of approach as the author encompasses a broad sweep of time and geography to add understanding of an important world area. For the person going to the Middle East, chapters 6, 7, 8, 11, and 14 are especially useful for understanding social institutions of that area.

Hsu, Francis L. K. *Americans and Chinese: Two Ways of Life.* New York: Henry Schuman, 1953.

Particularly unique in comprehending the scope of cultural differences and their implications and the interrelatedness of human behavior, as the author combines his Chinese background, his adopted American orientation, and his social science skills to present American and Chinese culture side by side. Useful for people going to the Far East, and also those interested in understanding cultural difference *per se.* The reader may not agree with all the interpretations made and may feel the author overcritical of some aspects of American life, but keeping in mind the unique position of the author, the book provides much material for consideration.

Kluckhohn, Clyde. *Mirror for Man: The Relation of Anthropolgy to Modern Life.* New York: Whittlesey House, 1949.

The layman's introduction to the fruits of the anthropologist's achievements. Chapters on "Queer Customs," "The Gift of Tongues," "Personality in Culture," "The Anthropologist Looks at the United States," and "The Anthropologist Looks at the World" are especially interesting.

Murphy, Gardner. *In the Minds of Men: The Study of Human Behavior and Social Tensions in India.* New York: Basic Books, 1953.

A rewarding combination: a treatment of some of the most acute of India's problems and a profound

introduction to the people of India. It is an excellent documentation of the relationships between culture and personality discussed in this pamphlet. The study was requested by the Government of India, was undertaken by UNESCO, and was executed by scholars of several countries.

Rodnick, David. *Postwar Germans: An Anthropologist's Account.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948.

The rationale of German life in Hesse is seen as one notes how the culture molds the personality of the individual from childhood through adult life and how the confusion of the postwar area is reflected in the outlooks on life held by various groups of German people. Whether one is going to Germany or not, this is a good sample of what to look for when abroad if the people are to be understood.

Schurz, William Lytle. *This New World: The Civilization of Latin America.* New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1954.

This is a sample of a somewhat special approach to the understanding of an area. Drawing material from the entire area, the author concentrates attention on peoples and institutions, describing the civilization of today and explaining its development. See also *Latin America,* by the same author and publisher, 1949.

Useem, John and Ruth Hill Useem. *The Western-Educated Man in India.* New York: The Dryden Press, 1955.

By concentrating attention on the problem of the Indian national who has been educated in the West, the authors give a good insight into the cultural factors involved when one culture makes an impact on another through individuals who are most intensively exposed and have to face a new adaptation. Useful for all interested in culture contact problems; especially useful for the person going to India.

White, Theodore H. *Fire in the Ashes: Europe in Mid-Century.* New York: William Sloane Associates, 1953.

This is a sample of a treatment of national and international affairs of Europe in the postwar period. While the author necessarily covers many aspects of Europe too quickly, it is useful for establishing a pattern in the events that may well not have been clearly seen on a day-to-day basis as we lived through this period. Germany, France, and England are especially discussed, along with the role of the Marshall plan and American diplomacy.

C. Specialized sources

Bloomfield, L. *Outline Guide for the Practical Study of Foreign Languages* (pamphlet). Baltimore: Linguistic Society of America, 1942.

A pamphlet containing many good, practical suggestions for language study on your own. The method suggested is not the only way to learn a language, but the specific "do's" and "don'ts" give extremely valuable advice.

Hall, Robert. *Leave Your Language Alone.* Ithaca: Linguistica, 1950.

The linguistic scientist's counsel on language in easy-to-follow form. It is a helpful orientation to the problems of understanding your own language and of learning another.

Honigman, John J. *Culture and Personality.* New York: Harper & Bros., 1954.

A recent text in the study of culture and personality. Besides its presentation of the field, it shows not only the relation of personality to culture but to varying experience within a culture.

Murdock, George P., and others. *Outline of Cultural Materials.* New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, Ind., 1950.

This is the anthropologist's guide to cataloging and filing his observations. Its complete coverage should be interesting to a layman going abroad.

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